COAST ORANGE COUNTY MAGAZINE

Epicure Updates

Chef Mark McDonald of Old Vine Café in Costa Mesa.

A CHEF'S TOUR WITH OLD VINE CAFÉ'S MARK McDONALD

BY JENN TANAKA

Imagine the warm sun shining down on your face. A cool breeze kisses your cheeks as you saunter past bushels of Mediterranean vine-ripened produce, plucked hours before from gardens that dot the southern Italian countryside. "On our tours we make sure you visit the markets," says chef Mark McDonald of Old Vine Café in Costa Mesa. "You see the octopus still moving. The shrimp and some of the fish are still alive. It is as fresh as it can possibly be. … At one of the open-air markets that we visit in Calabria, you'll see vendors that offer only a dozen eggs and a couple bunches of artichokes, maybe some peppers that grow on their small property."

For McDonald, this lifestyle is magical. The Orange County chef's love for Italy stems from his time studying at culinary school in Calabria. That experience ignited a spark within him. Now McDonald shares his passion for the region and its culture by hosting intimate tours of Italy. For local diners in the know, the chef's Splendors of Italy tours have become a cult-favorite travel experience.

COAST: How did you discover Italy?
MARK MCDONALD: I worked and studied at the Italian Culinary Institute in Calabria, Italy. Then I spent time exploring the nearby regions. I fell in love with the different parts of southern Italy. Parts of Calabria and Sicily are so untouched and not yet developed. At the time, there really wasn't infrastructure for culinary tourism. I always thought that this would be a great place to bring clients one day. Share with them this amazing place that I had the opportunity to experience and fall in love with.

COAST: Tell us more about your tours.
MM: The tours are 10 days long. They are all-inclusive. (Airfare is not included.) We're not a tour company; we're not a travel agency. We're chefs with a love for Italy. Our goal is to share that on a very personal level – to show you an Italy that you would not see on a touristy tour. Our goal is to show you the real Italy in a sense. There are 20 different regions. Those places are beautiful and rich with culture.

COAST: What regions do you visit on your northern Italian tours?
MM: On the northern tour we offer a taste of four different regions – Emilia-Romaña, Veneto, Alto Adige and Lombardia. We visit three different wineries in three completely different areas of Italy that specialize in three different styles of wine making.

COAST: Elaborate about the food …
MM: All of the meals are dining experiences – whether it is with the restaurants that we work with or the meals that chef John Nocita (founder of the Italian Culinary Institute in Calabria) and I prepare for the guests. The meals are multi-course with wine pairings. Some can be very traditional, and some very innovative. We build on regional dishes and show you the evolution of Italian cuisine.

COAST: What ingredients most excite you when you visit southern Italy?
MM: Southern Italy has some of the most amazing seafood on the planet. Italy is essentially a peninsula, and several different bodies of water surround it. Down in Calabria we have the Ionian Sea on one side, the Tyrrhenian Sea on the other tip of the boot, and in between Calabria and Sicily is where the Ionian Sea and the Mediterranean Sea meet. So you have all these influences in the bodies of water out there. As a result, the seafood is amazing.

The seared octopus dish was inspired by McDonald's recent trip to Calabria, Italy.

COAST: How do your tours inspire the menu at Old Vine Café?
MM: The citrus and the seafood in Calabria inspired my octopus dish. We use Meyer lemon as the citrus element. Meyer lemon isn't necessarily something that is grown in Calabria. But the region is known for different types of citrus. The octopus there is some of the best that I've had in the world. Like anything I do at Old Vine Café, there's a twist. The octopus is cooked slowly until it's very tender, then we pan sear it to order. It crisps up the edges and gives it a different texture. It's served over toasted sourdough bread crumbles, seared celery with a celery ribbon garnish, and a Meyer lemon emulsion, then it's drizzled with a garlic-infused olive oil.

COAST: How does this experience differ from other Italian culinary tours?
MM: There is a common misconception that it's a cooking tour and you'll just be cooking the whole time. There is a little bit of that, but really, for us, my goal with these tours is providing the ultimate package for any person no matter what their interests are – whether they like to cook, whether they're into history, whether they're into culture or whether they just want to eat.

Learn more about the Splendors of Italy tours by visiting Old Vine Café, 2937 Bristol Street, Costa Mesa, 714.545.1411 :: oldvinecafe.com

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK RIGHTMIRE